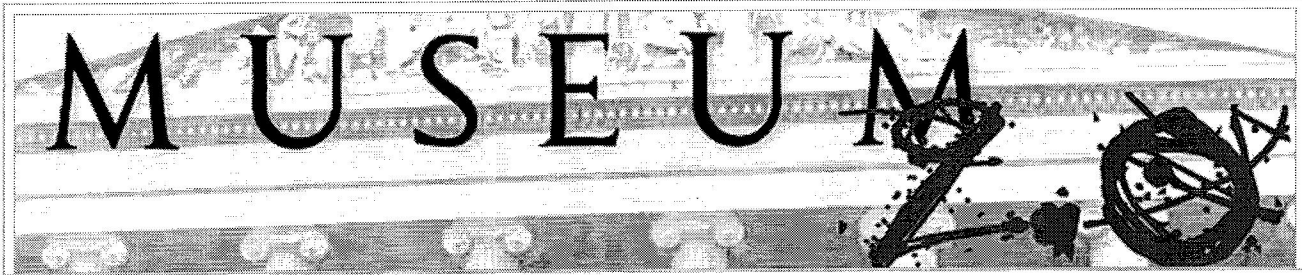
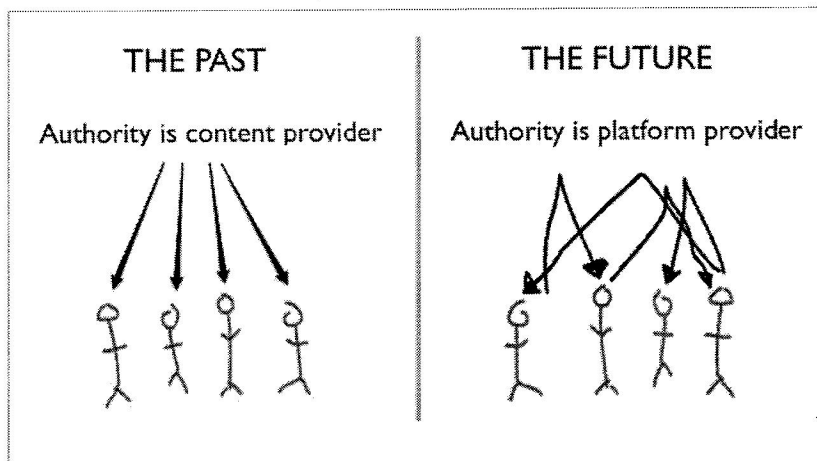


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WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 08, 2008

## The Future of Authority: Platform Power



I have a lot of conversations with people that go like this:

Other person: "So, you think that museums should let visitors control the museum experience?"

Me: "Sort of."

Other person: "But doesn't that erode museums' authority?"

Me: "No."

One of the primary fears museum professionals (and all professionals) have about entering new relationships with audiences is the fear of losing control. For hundreds of years, we've owned the content and the message. While we may grudgingly acknowledge the fact that visitors create their own versions of the message around subsets of the content, we don't consciously empower visitors to redistribute their own substandard, non-authoritative messages. So when people like me start advocating for the creation of tools and opportunities by which visitors can share their stories, reaggregate the artifacts, even rate and review each others' creations, museum professionals of all stripes get concerned. If the museum isn't in control, how can it thrive?

We have to change the framing of this conversation. **There is a difference between control and expertise.** In these conversations, people often say, "don't expert voices matter?" and my emphatic response is YES. Content expertise matters. Content control shouldn't.

Museums should feel protective of the expertise reflected in their staff, exhibits,

HI, I'M NINA SIMON.  
LET'S TALK.

I design and research participatory museum experiences.

☒ Nina

I'm the author of *The Participatory Museum*. You can contact me, check out my work, read the book, and find me on Twitter.

### WHAT IS MUSEUM 2.0?

Museum 2.0 explores ways that web 2.0 philosophies can be applied in museum design. For more information, [click here](#).

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programs, and collections. In most museums, the professional experience of the staff--to preserve objects, to design exhibits, to deliver programs--is not based on content control. It's based on creation and delivery of experiences. And in a world where visitors want to create, remix, and interpret content messages on their own, museums can assume a new role of authority as "platforms" for those creations and recombinations.

The problem arises when expertise creates a feeling of entitlement to control the entire visitor experience. Power is attractive. Being in control is pleasant. It lets you be the only expert with a voice. But if our expertise is real, then we don't need to rule content messages with an iron fist. As Ian Rogers has said, "losers wish for scarcity. Winners leverage scale."

Single voices represented on single labels is not scalable. I believe we need to develop museum "platforms" that allow us to harness, prioritize, and present the diversity of voices around a given object, exhibit, or idea. This does not mean we are giving all the power to visitors. We will grant them a few opportunities--to create their own messages, to prioritize the messages that resonate best for them personally--in the context of a larger overall platform. The platform is what's important. It's a framework that museums can (and should) control, and there's power in platform management.

When you think of a platform for user-generated content, you may not think of that platform as having power. But the companies that run YouTube, Flickr, and other major Web 2.0 sites have lots of power. There are four main powers that platforms have:

1. the power to set the rules of behavior
2. the power to preserve and exploit user-generated content
3. the power to promote and feature preferred content
4. the power to define the types of interaction available to users

These powers constitute a set of controls which constitutes a real and valuable authority. Let's take a look at each one and how it might be applied in museums.

## 1. The power to set the rules of behavior.

User-generated content sites control user and community behavior, both implicitly through the tools that are and aren't offered, and explicitly through community management. Every Web 2.0 site has rules about acceptable content and ways that users can engage with each other--consider this article about the complicated and often highly subjective (read: powerful) Flickr community guidelines. These rules are not uniform, and their differences often influence the makeup of users who feel welcome and choose to engage.

When it comes to museums, comparable rules can guarantee that the museum remains a safe, welcoming place for visitors of all kinds. There are some "rules" already in place--like the rule that you have to pay to enter--that may have great effect on the types of users who engage in museums and the behavior they display within. Museums should consider, as Web 2.0 community managers do, what behaviors and visitors they want to support and which rules will make those people feel most at home in the institution.

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Thomas Hayden Thank you for the opportunity to discuss this. A former Google StreetView photographer (via Immersive Media) here with two questions: 1.) When will Google open up its Maps platform to...

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Matthew Andress I would also like to know about the censoring. Why are certain artworks censored? Is it for content (nudity I suspect) or were there pieces that the museums/donors didn't want displayed?

Quick Hit: What Should I Ask about Google Art? • 8 hours ago

Lynn I got involved with making my own art collection - which I thought was great. But then I wanted to do more with it- I wanted a way to display it all together, more than in a little row - and to see...

Quick Hit: What Should I Ask about Google Art? • 13 hours ago

## 2. The power to use and exploit user-generated content.

Platforms also have the power to set rules related to preservation and ownership of the content on them--often with quite strict IP statutes that favor the platform over users. Every time you post a photo on Flickr, you give its owner, Yahoo!, the right to use that photo however they see fit. The same is true on YouTube, and on sites like Facebook, which are "walled gardens," you can't even easily export your user-generated content (friends, events, updates) outside of Facebook itself.

Again, these rules reflect platform control, and when the control is too heavy-handed, users get annoyed and stay away. Museums will always need to retain some powers to manage the preservation of objects, to wield IP controls properly, and to manage the digital reproduction and dissemination of content. There are many models as well for what we do with user-generated content in the museum. There are some emerging case studies for this. The Smithsonian American Art Museum's current *Ghosts of a Chance* game is accessioning player-generated objects into a temporary part of their collection database, with clear rules about what happens to the objects at the end of the game (they are the responsibility of a sub-contractor). In the same way that Web 2.0 sites display a range of respect for user-retained intellectual property, museums can navigate and create their own rules--and related powers--for content developed by visitors on site.

## 3. The power to promote and feature preferred content.

When you go onto a user-generated content site like YouTube, you don't just see a jumble of videos. One of the greatest powers retained by these platforms is the power to feature content that reflects the values of the platform. These values may skew towards promoting content with the most popularity/views, the newest content, or content that is unique in some way. The choice of what to display on the front page is not just about design. There have been huge user-protests of both YouTube and Digg for perceived bias in the "featured content" algorithms that vault some content to the top. And while some sites strive for transparency, most find ways to feature the kind of content and behavior that they want to see modeled for other users.

This may be the most important platform power when it comes to museums because it is the one that allows the platform to present its values and model preferred behavior. And many museums are far from assuming this power. Most museum projects that allow visitors to create content only allow for the most basic of prioritization. Consider video kiosks where visitors can create their own short clips (a pet peeve of mine). Many museum video kiosks will feature clips from famous people but do nothing to prioritize and prominently display high-quality visitor submissions. The kiosks are organized by recency, not content value--and so new visitors walking up are not given a model for the kind of content the museum would most like to receive.

When museums do assume this power, it is often in a zero-transparency way that doesn't model behavior for users. When I spoke with Kate Roberts about MN150,

Inna Kizhner The question of IPR and copyright seems to have been raised by the first question in the series, but I would be much interested to know how they managed to cope (intend to cope in case of enlarging...

Quick Hit: What Should I Ask about Google Art? · 14 hours ago

Hmbwells I would like to know what their plans are for adding more museums to the project and how museums that are interested in participating can get on the list. I would also like to know if they are...

Quick Hit: What Should I Ask about Google Art? · 18 hours ago

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 Minnesota History Center exhibition based on visitor-generated nominations, she explained that after the nomination period was over, they entirely shut down visitor engagement in the selection process. It just felt too messy to do anything but lock the staff in a room and sort through the nominations. When the exhibition opened a year later, visitors could see which nominations were valued and featured, but they couldn't get this information in an early feedback loop that would have allowed them to improve their nominations during the submission process.

#### 4. The power to define available interactions.

This power is so basic that it is often forgotten. On YouTube, you can share videos. On Craigslist, you can buy and sell stuff. On LibraryThing, you can tag and talk about books. Each Web 2.0 platform has a limited feature set and focuses on one or two basic actions that users can take. Museums don't need to offer every kind of interaction under the sun--we just have to pick the few interactions that most support the kind of behavior and content creation that we value. Again, there's a lot of power in the decision of whether visitors will be allowed to contact each other, rate artifacts, or make their own exhibits. As long as you create a platform that is consistent in its values and the interactions provided, you will be able to control the experience as you open up content authority.

There are real opportunities here for museums to retain authority related to values, experiences, and community behavior. The power of the platform may not let you dictate every message that floats through your doors. But with good, thoughtful design, it can ensure that those messages enhance the overall museum experience.

POSTED BY NINA SIMON 

LABELS: CORE MUSEUM 2.0 IDEAS, PARTICIPATORY MUSEUM, USERCONTENT, WEB2.0

#### 12 COMMENTS, ADD YOURS!:

Alyssa Gardina, Marketing Assistant said...

What a great post - I think the most significant thing that museums could do with video kiosks (see point 3) is add the ability for users to rate the videos. That adds another level of user interaction that could be called upon to select videos for the front page.

I think it's hard for museums to give up control, but it's happening little by little. While some of us still fight for more interactive and user-generated exhibits, we're starting blogs and Flickr pages in an attempt to get our visitors and audiences involved. It's a process, but we're moving forward!

8:55 AM

What Could Kill an Elegant, High-Value Participatory Project?

Avoiding the Participatory Ghetto: Are Museums Evolving with their Innovative Web Strategies?

Museum Photo Policies Should Be as Open as Possible

An Open Letter to Museums on Twitter

The Magic Vest Phenomenon and Other Wearable Tools for Talking to Strangers

Warning: Museum Graduate Programs Spawn Legions of Zombies!

Book Discussion: Civilizing the Museum Book Discussion:

Groundswell Book Discussion:

Sustaining Innovation Book

Discussion: The Great Good Place

Book Discussion: Visitor Voices

Book: The Participatory Museum business models children's

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Quick Hits storytelling Talking

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Projects and Influences

usercontent virtual worlds

visitors web2.0 youth


PAST POSTS BY MONTH



 Sarah said...

Nina, this is great! Something I've been trying to figure out how to articulate myself. I've been reading lots of Ira Shor, Friere, McLaren, etc, lately, and this really speaks to encouraging critical thinking and critical pedagogy in museums. I'll post more when I've digested. And will probably link this, if that's cool?

4:27 PM

 Nina Simon said...

Sarah,  
Please do link to it! I'd love to hear more about how you see this connecting to some of the theory around free-choice learning... I hadn't been thinking in that direction.

8:43 PM

peter linett said...

Wonderful post, Nina, and I've already used your content authority/platform authority distinction with a client, with credit of course. (Shameless cribbing by consultants? I'm shocked!) But if I'm one of those museum people you mention in that little dialogue, then I wasn't representing my question well. It's not "But doesn't that erode museums' authority?", as if that were a scary prospect. I hope it *will* in some ways, and your nuanced distinction here between control and expertise help us see how that will happen. The difference boils down to whether the museum's content expertise is a tool used by the museum for its own purposes or a tool made available to visitors to use for *their* own purposes (purposes defined only loosely by the museum, via the four powers you enumerate). I think we agree that the latter is a healthy and long-overdue alternative to the former.

But in some ways I think you're underplaying the conflict here. The people who hold power in many museums are academically trained subject-matter experts who tend to see the public function of museums as some form of knowledge transfer, whether they call that education, learning, or some more experiential-sounding variant. And they're backed up in that worldview by other powerful constituencies, especially museum educators. So even if they do see themselves as belonging to a profession whose job is the "creation and delivery of experiences," as you say (which I doubt, in many cases), the *purpose* of those experiences is pre-ordained: it's some kind of (pleasurable, free choice, affective, transformative, insert-buzzword-du-jour) learning. If you believe this, then you will insist that the museum has an unavoidable responsibility to at least guide, if not control outright, the content or story that gets told around its objects. Otherwise the audience collectively creates the stories (plural), some of which are wrong and others simply (in the museum's view) unedifying.

- ▶ 2011 (14)
- ▶ 2010 (80)
- ▶ 2009 (83)
- ▼ 2008 (106)
  - ▶ December (8)
  - ▶ November (6)
  - ▼ October (7)
    - Scratch: An Educational, Multi-Generational Online...
    - How (and Why) to Develop a Social Media Handbook
    - Self-Censorship for Museum Professionals
    - Quick Hit: Meet Me in Philadelphia!
    - The Future of Authority: Platform Power
    - What Cross-Platform Gaming is Doing for Books... a...
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**I** You don't have to be one of the old-guard, object-based museum directors in Jim Cuno's book *Whose Muse?* to acknowledge that museums' purposes and audiences' purposes can easily be at odds here. Certainly the traditional educational agenda I'm talking about is hard to reconcile with the four powers you endorse under the heading of platform control. Imagine if Flickr or YouTube had an overriding goal of conveying a certain kind of internally-housed, expert knowledge or interpretation about the photos and videos they aggregate, or if LibraryThing strived to pass on its own knowledge of, or standards for, literature. Sure, there are editorial reviews on Amazon along with the user reviews, and various forms of expert opinion or influence are in evidence on many 2.0 platforms, a few examples of which you mention here. But those sites aren't nonprofits funded by foundations and government programs interested in educational or other individual or civic 'improvement' outcomes, as museums are, and their success isn't evaluated on that basis. Bottom line: this kind of change is going to be more complex and contested than many people think, because it's really an *ends* question rather than a *means* question.

But all this is parallel to my intended question about what museums may surrender as they shift to the platform model: not just authority but vision. What I'm worried about is that museum people will see this shift as an excuse to give up completely on being unique self-creations, intuitive, subjective, idiosyncratic, and not necessarily fully explicable on rational grounds. From curmudgeonly collector Albert Barnes to Wonka-like sculptor Bob Cassilly, there has always been a tradition of museum or exhibition as 'installation art,' as a kind of framing and interpreting artwork in which other artifacts are arrayed. But this has become rarer in the era of professionalization and best practices and the resulting sameness one feels in new exhibits and museums around the country.

Can a platform be visionary in the same sense—I mean, after the platform's own novelty as a mechanism wears off? Can museums do and be both? Surely the answer is yes, but it's not going to be easy to envision or pull off. Your beloved Click! show in Brooklyn is not the answer, I think. Let's talk about what might be.

2:05 PM

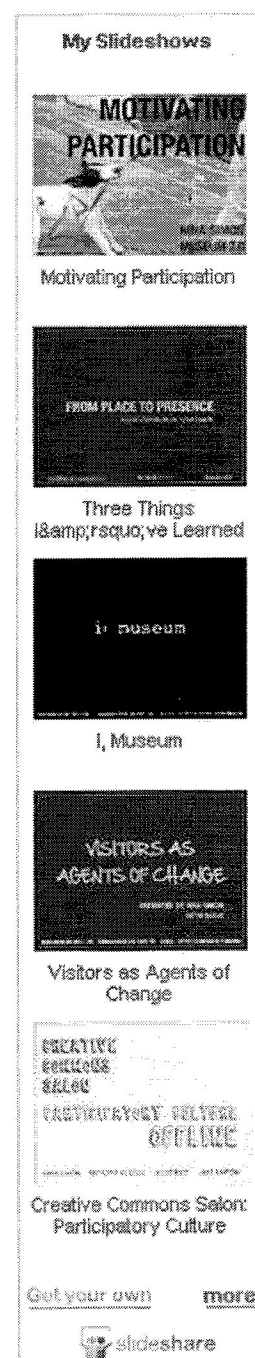
Nina Simon said...

Peter,

Great comment. You really articulate the core underlying issues here.

I'm ok with museums that want to tell their own stories. I assume that those museums will continue to exist and thrive. I am narrowly focused on museums that claim (however disingenuously) that they want to be

#### DOWNLOADABLE PRESENTATIONS



#### MUSEUM BLOGS THAT EXCITE ME

Asking Audiences (mostly by Peter Linett)  
 Useum (Beck Tench)  
 ExhibiTricks (Paul Orselli)  
 Museum of the Future (Jasper Visser)

a "town square" for social engagement. At the Science Center World Congress in June, representatives from science centers worldwide pledged to make science centers "safe spaces for difficult conversations." If they indeed want to do that, and if museums want to engage with visitors in "community"--two huge ifs--we have to find some genuine ways to do so. I see the platform model as one that can allow some museums to transition from paying lip service to the "town square" to really living it.

Whether a storyteller or a platform, every good museum needs vision. My fear is that some of these community initiatives will be branded as failures because, as you point out, they are often used as excuses to avoid strong visionary leadership. If we just "put it out there" for visitors as a new fad, we fail, and museums might start to think that being safe spaces for any kind of conversations was just a load of hooey.

So I think all kinds of museums need vision--those that are becoming participatory platforms and those that are storytellers. Because even in the traditional world, the idiosyncratic shining stars are few and far between. They are almost as fringe as I am, and they don't have a big Web hype machine helping push their ideas out there. I feel more allied with those kinds of museum leaders (Adam Lerner of the Belmar Lab of Art and Ideas comes to mind) than with those who are half-heartedly doing "2.0". And I think those visionaries do exist in participatory platform design--the creators of the Living Library come to mind as a prime example.

To quote Ian Rogers, the goal hasn't changed: we all want to make something great. Whether we do that by designing great experiences or great platforms, we succeed. I just happen to be more interested in the platform side of things.

7:03 PM

seb chan said...

hey nina

i am getting around to blogging a response/conversation-continuance over at F&N when I get a moment.

i'm not sure it has to be an either storyteller OR participatory platform choice for museums. some are going to find that the by offering a platform in the digital space allows them to be even more auteur-ish/storyteller-ish in the galleries themselves.

libraries have far better positioned themselves as 'platforms' in recent years - and as a result have really become 'the town square'. the role and purpose of collections in libraries versus museums is a defining factor

Museum Audience Insight  
(Reach Advisors)  
Center for the Future of  
Museums (AAM)  
Jumper (Diane Ragsdale)  
Museums Now (Gyroscope)  
Poesy-Praxis (Jaime Kopke)  
The Uncataloged Museum  
(Linda Norris)  
Thinking about Exhibits (Ed  
Rodley)

5607 readers  
BY FEEDBURNER



here. the reorganisation of human resources in libraries has made many things possible that museums will find hard to do whilst pursuing other core elements of their mission/s.

anyway, a more complex response and extension of the conversation will (eventually) appear on F&N

seb

9:50 PM

Seb Chan said...

Hi Nina

A response of sorts has exited my keyboard over at F&N.

I hope the conversation continues!

5:36 AM



Dottie said...

Nina-

I think you hit this one on the head! Very interesting!

We should talk about a project idea that I have.

Dottie

7:31 AM

Shin Yu said...

Thanks for providing this background reading for the social technologies class. I am struck by your discussion of power as it relates to social technologies - you are talking about the ability to bring diverse (subaltern) voices and a polyvocal (postmodern) approach to the museum environment through the rethinking and redistribution of power through the careful use and controls of social tools.

In reading the brief passage about visitor-generated video clips, I thought of the oral history studio at the Experience Music Project. Within a larger exhibition of musicians and "experts" speaking on various aspects of their musical experiences (on individual computer and listening stations), the EMP has a small recording room set aside where visitors can enter and record their own oral history experiences based on a few prompts that are presented to them by the EMP. The staff then screens these submissions and features the stronger interviews in the gallery alongside the "famous people."

2:02 PM



Jill Hardy said...

Nina, this really resonates after visiting the Denver Art Museum and experiencing all the different ways the museum allowed for participatory learning and contribution. And it all happened with somewhat conventional techniques. Crazy, fancy, bells and whistles not required! The DAM introduced tons of places to sit, desks and chairs, books to peruse, notebooks to draw in, overhead projectors for slide shows, Rolodex trays to read and contribute to, and music to listen to. All pretty simple techniques that are genius for allowing visitors to interact with each other, with objects, and with the museum itself.

11:46 PM

Nicole Robert said...

Thank you for the interesting discussion, and for this preface to our class discussion today. I think that museums can still fulfill the role of education, and still put out a mission-based message, while inviting visitors to be greater participants. I rarely hear people acknowledge that even in a traditional museum setting, where content is delivered from the museum to the visitor, visitors are already making choices about what they think, what they agree with, whether they will be influenced by the content, how they understood the content, how the content is related (or unrelated) to their lives. What these platforms give museums is a window into this process that is already occurring, and some control over how that conversation happens.

11:19 AM

automotive hand tools said...

very interesting to post ... undoubtedly for me the most important points are 3 to 4 ....

Steven C. Hendricks

8:48 AM

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## TWEETBACKS

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